

*Making Elizabeth*  
by Audrey Bernstein

Alice sits in a stiff armchair by lamplight, reading. Her husband coughs and spits into a napkin. A vague irritation flits across Alice's mind's eye like a firefly—a pulse in the dark too brief to capture. Just like that it is gone. Rain patters on the windowsill, the fireplace flickers, and a line in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, pinned beneath her white finger, catches her attention: “Seeking: Information on Legendary E.E. Siddal.” She feels an emptiness when she drags her finger along the type—not hollow or numbing but sharp, like a grain of sand beneath her skin. “I am an author writing a novel about the Pre-Raphaelite circle of artists. I have found little information on the wife of Rossetti, though I am entranced by the story of her exhumation. I have heard that, when they dug her up seven years after her death, her hair was as luscious and red as it was in life. Now, I seek more detail on the legend. I am hoping any living person in Sheffield who made acquaintance with the model might write with any information. My address is listed below. Sincerely, W.G. Wells.”

At the end of the sentence, Alice finds the same emptiness again and then a familiar wave of grief, a swelling sensation in her chest as intuitive as hunger or pleasure. Her husband smacks his lips and turns a page. Alice closes her eyes and lets herself sink into the memories of her friend. Elizabeth's tumbling laugh. The scent of acrylics in the Sheffield studios. The shifting sunlight through the windows.

Alice's husband slaps closed the book he has been reading, indicating it is time for bed. Alice rips the *Telegraph* inquiry from the paper and tucks it into her dress.

The following morning, Alice finds herself looking intently in the mirror, searching for a flicker of something in her eyes. She is thinking about what the man said. *Elizabeth, a legend!* How absurd! Elizabeth, who chewed the edge of her pen until it was mangled, whose elbows were so dry and white in the winter they bled, who found great pleasure in plunging in the lake at night, who painted on canvas with her eyes closed like rendering a dream, who killed herself one winter evening, a needle and thread in her hands, a dress the size of a doll laid out on her pillow.

No—Elizabeth was not a legend. In life she was a woman and in death a corpse. A woman: not nearly as cavernous as some like to think. Not vacuous or indiscernible but textured and bright. Blunt as a room with the lights on. Alice inhales deeply. She is seventy-five years old and breathing feels harder these days.

*Can she make these men understand? Does she want to?*

Later that evening, while her husband reads, Alice sits down to write.

*Dear Mr. W.G. Wells,*

*My name is Alice Shepherd, and I attended the Sheffield School of Art many decades ago. I was struck by your note in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph. The name you reference, Elizabeth Siddall, is intimately familiar to me, but the story you tell is not.*

*My friend Elizabeth was not a legend in the slightest. No woman is. Even though you have gotten it all wrong, I feel something inside urging me to write to you. I cannot quite put my finger on it, the feeling, but it is something I have not felt in a long time. Of course, this is of no import to you.*

*I do not plan to tell you how Elizabeth was plucked from poverty by the Pre-Raphaelites like Cinderella. I will not tell you the color of her hair when her husband lifted her corpse from her grave. I will not discuss the pose that made her appear most beautiful. What I tell you will not make you feel better about the world. It may make you feel worse. But if you would like to know about Elizabeth as a poet, a painter, a friend, and a woman, I encourage you to read ahead.*

Alice feels a new anxious energy thrumming in her arms and chest as she leans over the desk. Her nose hangs inches above the page and she breathes quickly. She knows that if she presses pen to paper again, she will cut something open that can hardly be stitched closed. She glances toward the window. The sky is pink and gold like something breaking open.

*I first met Elizabeth in 1858. She was assigned to sit beside me in our Watercolor class. I quickly became aware of her awful habit of nail-biting. While one hand moved in slow, deliberate strokes on paper, the other twitched manically at her mouth. I kicked her stool once in an attempt to shock her out of the activity. She did not seem to notice or care. When she was absent from class, I felt relieved, and when she appeared again, sniffing, shuffling in her chair, and chewing on her fingers, I felt doubly enraged.*

*The first months at Sheffield went like this—Elizabeth, relentless and uncaring in her fidgeting, and I, festering in my irritation. My watercolors from that time all seem to quiver with rage. Still, other pursuits at Sheffield held my attention. Elizabeth was not yet the center of my life.*

*The summer before starting at Sheffield, I began writing poems. Each morning, I departed my family's cottage just as the sun rose, not caring to change out of my nightdress or comb my hair; to locate a patch of warmth in the grass and write. My poetry was always melancholy, haunted by themes of violence and death. I did not know whether my verse was good, but I knew it felt natural. I knew I didn't want to stop.*

*When I arrived at the Sheffield School of Art, I sealed my most prized poetry in an envelope and delivered it to our Watercolor instructor, Professor Collins, who was known among our peers to be a prolific poet. In his office, I asked politely whether he would offer me feedback on my verses. He smiled, and I noticed one of his teeth in the back was missing. He told me to come in on Wednesday. He would read the poems by then and offer his criticism.*

*When I entered the room on Wednesday, I noticed the envelope on his desk was still full of poems. Only one page lay flat on his desk. "Listen," he said, urging me closer. "I read your work. It's all so sad, Dear. What do you have to be sad about?" His breath was hot and smelled of garlic. "No one as beautiful as you should spend her time writing sad poetry. Why don't you choose a more uplifting subject? Why don't you write about...love?" His beady black eyes locked on my mouth. "Have you ever been in love, Dear?" I pressed the corners of my mouth into a trembling smile as my eyes filled with tears. I wore a long crinoline skirt and his fingers crawled toward it like venomous snakes. He pressed his grip into my thigh. "I have to g-go" I stuttered, jolting upright. I left the door open and my poems inside.*

*Tears blurred my vision as I ran through the hallway. I wanted to be anywhere else. In my rush to escape, I slammed into a heavy shoulder; it knocked into my chest so hard I lost my breath. Of course, the shoulder belonged to Elizabeth Siddall. I cursed her persistent intrusion into my life and tried to keep running, but she gripped my wrist with her hand. "Are you okay?" she asked. I pulled. So did she. "Alice," she said. "What happened?" I was shocked by the sound of my name in her voice and by the intensity of her gaze. Somehow, I knew: she knew. The compassion in her eyes when I told her nearly broke me. I could tell she was fighting tears and I said "It's okay, really." She just shook her head and kept her eyes locked on me, brilliant and wide.*

*I had never confessed to anyone before the ways men had touched me and the shame I carried as a result. By telling Elizabeth, I gave her, whether I had intended to or not, a part of my soul. From that moment, we were tethered.*

*In December, Elizabeth switched dormitories so we could live together. She begged to read my poetry and then painted watercolors inspired by its scenes. She asked me to sit for a portrait and spent a fortnight painting my face without revealing it to me. I expected the piece to feel alien and devoid of feeling, as all the portraits I'd seen of women did. But when she revealed it to me, I felt so confronted by truth that I had to look away.*

*Of course, it did not look exactly like me. Elizabeth was not superbly talented in replicating details. But the picture felt like me so profoundly that it seemed my spirit had wandered from my body and landed on the page. I felt my deviance, my short temper, my sorrow, and my passion all reflected back to me, and I felt, for the first time, beautiful.*

*Elizabeth possessed more courage than I did. On my birthday, she delivered to me an envelope, wrapped in pink ribbon, containing all the poems I had left in Professor Collins' office. She told me she used a wire clothing hanger to break into the room at night and retrieve them. I felt truly beloved.*

*In the coldest moments of winter, she urged me to join her at the pond, where she threw off her clothes and plunged inside. I watched from the shore, shocked every time the frigid water didn't kill her. She infused my life with joy and spontaneity. She was a woman invigorated by life.*

*But she was also haunted. She suffered from night terrors, and I would often awake to her whimpering, eyes wide open, clawing at the thin skin over her wrists until she bled. If I tried to wake her, she would hit me or scream. "You're going to kill me," she once yelled, and then pressed a pillow to her face until her breathing became shallow. When she calmed down, I pulled the pillow away and brought it into my bed, where I breathed the smell of her perfume and sobbed until I fell asleep. If I tried to discuss these incidents with her in daylight, Elizabeth would turn cold, like a flower closing its petals in self-protection. I knew she was plagued by memories the same way I was, but I never pried into their contents. I didn't want to lose her, and I was scared any inquiry would only push her further away.*

*I worried about her often. The part of her that was haunted and perverse knew about my concern for her. In her worst moments, she relished in my distress. She would say things like: "How would you feel if I ran away and never came back?" or "I may not be here tomorrow" with a wink of deviance in her eyes. She would jump into the icy lake and stay under the surface for minutes at a time, bursting up for air only once she had sufficiently terrified me. When I grabbed onto her arms and begged her to never leave, she would melt into me like a child who had finally gotten her way.*

*A year and a half into our friendship, she did leave. I woke up one morning and her bed was empty. When the Headmaster passed me in the hall, he apologized that Elizabeth had to*

return home to London in such a hurry. I didn't understand. Why had she left? I didn't even have her address.

I developed mad theories to explain why she departed: she hated me, her mother had died, Rossetti had threatened to cease funding her sick brother's hospitalization. Never did I imagine that Elizabeth left because she was pregnant.

Six months later, I received a letter. It said only: "I need you. — E." Hatred had constricted my chest since the day Elizabeth left. But the moment I read her words, my anger died. I felt only longing. I had to see her. She was as precious to me as a child. Half of my heart, my blood. I caught the next train to London.

When I reached the Rossetti home, shaking and dazed, I was led by an olive-skinned man through the sitting room. It all felt like a dream, the emerald walls, the crystal chandelier, the sense that all the world was made of a shimmering liquid that would evaporate the moment I touched it. The man pushed open a door and there she was, Elizabeth, standing over a cradle, humming softly. She didn't turn to face me. She only whispered, "Shhh. You'll wake her."

The lock of the door clicked behind me and we were alone. The room was so still and dark it ached. I knew, even before I could see, that the cradle was empty.

I cut the space between us wordlessly. I stretched my arms out and she fell into them and wept and I knew, the same way she had known one year before, that something awful had happened. The story spilled out of her, first in whispers and murmurs and then in bursts of language so compressed it felt like she was being suffocated. Yes—there had been a baby—a small pear growing in her belly, a little thing with thumbs and a heartbeat, buoyant and fluttering and alive. She didn't want to tell me because she had been ashamed to admit that Rossetti had been visiting her in Sheffield. She was ashamed that it happened, but, more than that, she was ashamed that she wanted it so badly—to have a child with him, a child to call her own, a child to make her feel less alone, a child who would love her, a child who would never leave her, a child who would press her sweet-smelling head into her chest and want to stay forever.

The pregnancy didn't hurt, not terribly, but Elizabeth's nightmares grew more frequent. It was always the same—a young girl, screeching, clawing at her windows, at her belly, at her head—begging to be let out. When Elizabeth woke in the night screaming, she would be hushed by the back of Rossetti's hand. He didn't want to hit the baby, so he hit everywhere but. Bruises on her legs and neck and face that he covered when he painted her.

When her limbs ached he fed her laudanum and it settled her mind and she felt at peace at last, just her and her baby, they'd be safe, they'd be protected, they'd be loved.

But Rossetti didn't want a baby. He didn't want to be a father. He didn't want to marry Elizabeth. He was tired of her, of her nightmares, of her screaming, of her personhood.

Did he learn a particular concoction that would free him of responsibility? Did he slip something into her pill boxes? When he installed the lock on the outside of the nursery door, did he know what would happen? Did he know did he know did he know?

One morning Elizabeth woke up and the bed was covered in blood—so much blood. She bled and bled and bled and it didn't hurt, not really, because of the medication in her system, but when it all settled, there was something still, something dead, something quiet, and she knew her baby was gone.

She had expelled the story now and lay exhausted on the ground. I stroked her cheek and thought about forgiveness—how I'd forgive her for anything. She was so small, so broken, so cold.

*I asked her to return with me to Sheffield. But she refused. Her life was here in London. Her dead baby was here in London. Her sick brother was here in London. The clothes she'd sewn, the pink toys she'd stuffed, all here in London. She was too weak to move, too weak to leave.*

*When I left that day, kissing her forehead and telling her, "I will see you soon," I desperately wanted to believe that I was right—that I would see her soon. But I think I knew she wouldn't survive this. When I received the note from London two weeks later that she had overdosed on laudanum and died, it felt like a confirmation of what I had already known: Elizabeth was gone.*

*In the decades since Elizabeth's death, I have longed for her. I have grieved. Sometimes I dream at night that I killed her. And sometimes, in daylight, I struggle to convince myself that I did not. What would have happened if I had stayed one more day...if I had visited that night...if I had dragged her to Sheffield...But no. She wouldn't have come. She would've scratched and clawed and begged to stay. She would've done it anyway. She would've. She would've. She wouldn't have. She wouldn't have. Would she have?*

*The truth is, I don't know. I don't know whether I could've saved her, whether she would've lived, whether she would've died, whether she was destined to, like a firefly, spark and go out. This world is nearly unsurvivable—particularly for a woman. She did the best she could until she couldn't.*

*Of course, telling myself these stories about life and death and destiny—pretending that there is such a thing—makes me feel less complicit in Elizabeth's pain. In truth, I left her that day in London just as she'd left me in Sheffield.*

*It is hard. It is hard. It is hard to love and it is hard to live. And I understand, sometimes, why she did it. Sometimes a child feels like the only reason to go on.*

Alice wipes a tear from her cheek. Someone has been knocking at the door. She stands up and smooths her dress against her thighs. She is shaking as she opens it. A woman presses herself into Alice's chest.

"Mom," the woman whispers, aching with longing and relief. "Elizabeth," Alice whispers into her daughter's hair.

The letter Alice has been writing sits at the desk, unfinished but somehow complete. Of course, Alice knows, this story never belonged to Mr. Wells. It has always been and will always be for her daughter. Her daughter, Elizabeth Shepherd.

Tomorrow, Alice will open an old box from beneath her bed and retrieve a worn envelope wrapped in pink ribbon, containing all the poems she ever wrote. She will fold up the letter and place it inside, and she will attach a note to the top. *For Elizabeth.*

## Endnotes and Bibliography

Though not every event in this story is factually “verifiable,” everything I’ve written has derived from some grain of truth about Elizabeth Siddall’s life—a sentence in a letter, descriptions of her art, poetry she’s written, or reported stories from friends. My bibliography is listed below, along with some of the fragments of text that most inspired this piece.

Castleton, David, and David Castleton. “Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal & an Infamous Exhumation in Highgate Cemetery - David Castleton Blog - the Serpent’s Pen.” *David Castleton Blog - the Serpent’s Pen*, 4 Feb. 2021, [www.davidcastleton.net/dante-gabriel-rossetti-lizzie-siddall-exhumation-book-poems-wife-pre-raphaelites](http://www.davidcastleton.net/dante-gabriel-rossetti-lizzie-siddall-exhumation-book-poems-wife-pre-raphaelites). Accessed 7 May 2025.

“None of the facts support Howell’s account of Lizzie’s pristine condition. After the manuscript was rescued from the grave, pieces of putrefaction had to be scraped off. Then – before Rossetti could start transcribing the poems – the book needed to be soaked in disinfectant for a fortnight. Rossetti found wormholes in the pages, which had obliterated some words. Despite having been thoroughly disinfected, the book gave off a revolting stench. Once he’d finished his grim undertaking, Rossetti destroyed the manuscript. Three pages, however, survived and are still held in libraries.”

Chatfield, Stephanie. “Pre-Raphaelite Marriages: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal the Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood Blog.” *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, 10 Jan. 2012, [preraphaelitesisterhood.com/pre-raphaelite-marriages-dante-gabriel-rossetti-and-elizabeth-siddal/](http://preraphaelitesisterhood.com/pre-raphaelite-marriages-dante-gabriel-rossetti-and-elizabeth-siddal/).

“When Ned [Burn-Jones] and a heavily pregnant Georgie [Burne-Jones] came to visit her, Lizzie was in her room alone, staring at the empty baby’s cradle, which she would rock tenderly from side to side as though soothing her daughter to sleep. As the door creaked open she looked up and told them to be quiet so as not to wake the baby. The pregnant Georgie found this heart-rendingly sad; Ned thought Lizzie was being ridiculously over-dramatic.”

Hawksley, Lucinda. “The Tragedy of Art’s Greatest Supermodel.” *Www.bbc.com*, 31 July 2020, [www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200103-the-tragedy-of-arts-greatest-supermodel](http://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200103-the-tragedy-of-arts-greatest-supermodel).

“The love story between Siddal and Rossetti is like that of a tortured adolescent film script: for 10 years they were “engaged”, but Rossetti refused to set a wedding date. Neither was easy to live with: Siddal was addicted to the drug laudanum, and Rossetti was serially unfaithful.” “Rossetti and Ruskin had been controlling her life and she wanted to escape. Using her savings, she took one of her sisters to the spa town of Matlock in Derbyshire. Then, instead of returning to London, she travelled to Sheffield, her father’s birthplace, to stay with her cousins. Siddal soon moved into a lodging house, and enrolled at the Sheffield School of Art, determined to make it as an artist on her own.” “Rossetti made occasional journeys to visit her, but letters from friends in London revealed his affairs with other women, and their relationship ended in the middle of 1858. Much of what happened in her life during the next couple of years remains a mystery. Then, in the spring of 1860, she became dangerously ill. Her family contacted Ruskin and he told Rossetti, who rushed to be with her. Siddal had moved to the Sussex town of Hastings, a popular place for recuperating invalids. Rossetti arrived with a marriage licence and, as soon as she was well enough, they were married.” “She was delighted at the prospect of motherhood, but tragically she was addicted to laudanum. Perhaps this was why, on 2 May 1861, she gave birth to a stillborn daughter.” .

Marsh, Jan. *Elizabeth Siddal*. 8 May 2023.

“At Sheffield School of Art: Two correspondents to the local newspaper in 1911 confirmed they had been fellow students. One, identifying herself as “A.S.” stated that Miss Siddall attended the School regularly and joined the student excursion to the Manchester “Art Treasures”. The sculptor-craftsman Charles Green, who supported Ruskin’s endeavors in the city and was just a few years younger than Siddal, also recalled the Manchester trip. These testimonies can be relied upon... unlike that of William Rossetti who told an unnamed correspondent it was “improbable” that Lizzie had ever studied at Sheffield, or anywhere else.” (92) .

Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, His Family-Letters: Dedication*.

*Preface. Memoir*. 1895.

“In these years, 1850 to 1854, Dante Rossetti was so constantly in the company of Lizzie Siddal that this may even have conduced towards the break-up of the P.R.B. as a society of comrades. He was continually painting or drawing from her, and pretty soon his example and incitement brought her on to designing and painting for herself. He gave her some instruction [...] Certain it is that she had a gift very superior, in its quality if not in its actual outcome, to that which belongs to most female debutantes. The tone of her work was founded on that of Rossetti, with much less draughtmanship, limper forms, and cruder colour.” .

Siddal, Elizabeth. “The Bristorian.” *The Bristorian*, 25 Mar. 2024,

[www.thebristorian.co.uk/womens-history-month/https/wwwthebristoriancouk/blog-page-url/new-post-title-2](http://www.thebristorian.co.uk/womens-history-month/https/wwwthebristoriancouk/blog-page-url/new-post-title-2).

Zarevich, Emily. “Elizabeth Siddal, the Real-Life “Ophelia.”” *JSTOR Daily*, 27 Jan.

2023, [daily.jstor.org/elizabeth-siddal-the-real-life-ophelia/](https://daily.jstor.org/elizabeth-siddal-the-real-life-ophelia/)